Bomb specialists highly valued, highly needed

By Dave Moniz, USA TODAY

FORT MEADE, Md. — Staff Sgt. Ryan Lair gets straight to the point when talking about why he loves his job.

U.S. Army photo

The Army is short on soldiers like the bomb experts of the 744th Ordnance Company, who have the skills and nerves to "kill" explosives

"Blowing stuff up," he says with a wry smile, describing what he does as an explosive ordnance disposal specialist. Known in military shorthand as EOD, his job is one of the Army's most dangerous and tends to attract some of the same personality types as the elite Green Berets.

In the midst of a guerrilla war in Iraq in which the deadliest weapons are homemade explosives hidden in cars, under roads and even in animal carcasses, Lair and his band of bomb-killing brothers are among the most valued of troops. (Related story: Military in 'bidding war')

The problem is there aren't nearly enough EOD soldiers to go around — especially those with the experience to handle the most dangerous parts of the job. Lair and his comrades in the 744th Ordnance Company typify the personnel shortages hitting the wartime military.

The Army is so short of EOD soldiers that it is paying bonuses of up to $20,000 for recruits willing to sign up and awards as high as $50,000 to keep experienced soldiers. It has also taken the unusual step of assigning two full-time recruiters to do nothing but persuade other soldiers to leave their jobs and become EOD specialists. The shortage of specialists has also led the Pentagon to hire outside contractors to dispose of the hundreds of thousands of tons of leftover munitions in Iraq. (**Related story**: Security spending soars)

Munitions disposal is one of many hard-to-fill jobs that has left the Army scrambling to find bodies. The Army is critically short of a number of specialists, including truck drivers, petroleum supply troops, medical personnel and soldiers who prepare food, according to a report in March by the Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress.

The 744th, a tight-knit unit of about 20 members, is fighting its own war of attrition. Between private security contractors dangling salaries of $200,000 per year to his most experienced people, to federal agencies that also try to lure bomb specialists away from the Army, Capt. Chris Bartos has his hands full trying to keep his tiny unit whole.

Last year, members of the 744th spent six months in Iraq, where they were called in more than 200 times to destroy roadside explosives, caches of unexploded bombs and other dangerous weapons. The work is risky. A total of 13 EOD soldiers have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, all but one while on missions for their units.

First Sgt. Robert Breaux, a 15-year bomb disposal veteran, says the EOD motto is "initial success or total failure."

Shortage of team leaders

Designed to operate with seven two-man teams that handle the explosives, the 744th is nowhere near full strength. Bartos, the company commander, says he has only two team leaders who are qualified to disarm or destroy improvised bombs, perhaps the most critical task for EOD units right now.

In that respect, Bartos' unit is no different from other Army EOD outfits in the USA, which are struggling to find enough people, says Cathy Kropp, an Army spokeswoman at Aberdeen, Md.

The lack of trained specialists makes it harder to train the new troops Bartos gets and adds to the burden of the few experienced technicians assigned to the 744th.

"I've got plenty of younger guys, but I can't use them alone," Bartos says, explaining that only team leaders are qualified for the most dangerous missions, including using remote-controlled robots to blow up improvised explosive devices, commonly known as IEDs.

To be a team leader, an EOD soldier must have reached the rank of staff sergeant, a midcareer position that can take six to eight years for a newly minted recruit. Bartos has plenty of younger soldiers entering the unit, but they typically are low-ranking privates or specialists and are years away from becoming qualified as team leaders.

The shortage of EOD soldiers is driven in part by the nature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, the insurgents' weapon of choice is the IED, by far the single-largest cause of combat deaths. The proliferation of homemade bombs in Iraq and land mines in Afghanistan have kept units such as Bartos' extraordinarily busy.

Master Sgt. Matthew Boehme, one of the new EOD recruiters at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, said a typical unit can expect to spend six months in Iraq or Afghanistan, return home for 10-14 months, then go right back overseas.
The Army is in the midst of adding three battalions and six companies of EOD soldiers to meet the skyrocketing demand, despite the difficulty it is having filling the units it already has.

No rest, even at home

By Hadi Mizban, AP

EODs must find and "kill" explosives, like the undetonated bomb above, that are often hidden in cars, bags or buried.

Bartos' soldiers get little rest, even when they return from overseas deployments. From their base at Fort Meade northeast of Washington, soldiers from the 744th are constantly in demand for "VIP" missions searching for hidden bombs that might be used against the president or other senior government officials. Those missions could involve everything from crawling into air ducts to searching ceilings, elevator shafts and trash bins.

During the second week in July, the 744th had seven VIP assignments, which can be performed only by the two team leaders or by Bartos or Breaux, who are responsible for managing the unit and pitch in only when absolutely necessary.

Despite the dangers, EOD work appeals to soldiers who crave adventure. Many of the soldiers in the unit switched from other parts of the Army they found less appealing. Lair, who found he "didn't fit in as an infantryman," said he likes the fact that EOD soldiers work in small teams and have the independence to solve problems on their own, much like special operations commandos.

One enterprising EOD soldier recently came up with the idea of using a remote-controlled toy car to deliver tiny blocks of C4 plastic explosive used to blow up IEDs. The tiny radio-controlled cars, which can be equipped with video cameras, are much less costly to replace or repair than remote-controlled robots.

Kropp says it is that independent streak and flair for experimentation that attracts soldiers to the job.

Sgt. 1st Class Dale Schmidt, a 19-year Army veteran who is one of two team leaders in the 744th, fell in love with the idea of becoming an EOD technician after watching *Danger UXB*, a public television drama about British specialists who disposed of unexploded bombs from the German aerial blitz during World War II.

"In this job," Schmidt says, "you see the results of the mission. It is one of the few jobs in the Army where you are not actually killing people but saving lives."

Schmidt won't be with the unit much longer, though. He plans to leave the Army next year after the 744th returns from Afghanistan, most likely to take a lucrative job with a government agency or a private defense contractor.